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ABSTRACT

If counselors are to meet the needs of adolescent girls, they must understand the unique perspective and experiences of this population. Much research that claims to report on "young women," has, in fact, used only college women as subjects. Research that studies teen-age women, specifically, needs to be examined and understood by counseling professionals so that they can aid adolescent girls in making healthy choices for themselves. This article is the product of a review of professional counseling literature written about adolescent females. "Adolescence," "Journal of Adolescence," "Journal of Adolescent Research," "Journal of Research on Adolescents," and "Journal of Youth and Adolescence" were examined for the last five years. "Journal of Counseling Psychology," "The Counseling Psychologist," and "Journal for Counseling and Development" were examined for the last three years. Specific topics discussed in the paper include body image, aggression, and adolescent girls' experiences with counseling. Examples of some of the obstacles adolescent women faced are discussed. Suggestions for further research are given. (Contains 13 references.) (Author)

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Running Head: ADOLESCENT FEMALES LITERATURE REVIEW

Our Current Base of Knowledge of Adolescent Females: A Review of the Literature.

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Abstract

If counselors are to meet the needs of adolescent girls, they must understand the unique perspective and experiences of this population. Much research that claims to report on 'young women,' has, in fact, used only college women as subjects. Research that studies teen-age women, specifically, needs to be examined and understood by counseling professionals so that we can aid adolescent girls in making healthy choices for themselves.

This article is the product of a review of professional counseling literature written about adolescent females. *Adolescence*, *Journal of Adolescence*, *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *Journal of Research on Adolescents*, and *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* were examined for the last five years. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *The Counseling Psychologist*, and *Journal of Counseling and Development* were examined for the last three years. Specific topics discussed in the paper include body image, aggression, and adolescent girl's experiences with counseling. Examples of some of the obstacles adolescent women faced are discussed. Suggestions for further research are given. Citations and a Reference List are included.

Our Current Base of Knowledge of Adolescent Females:

A Review of the Literature

INTRODUCTION

Opportunities available to young women today are more broad-based than ever before; it has been widely reported that females are outnumbering males on college campuses, in both undergraduate and graduate programs; *The Digest of Education Statistics* reports that total fall enrollment in 1999 for degree-granting institutions was 8,300,578 females and 6,490,646 males, and "Between 1989 and 1999, the number of men enrolled rose 5 percent, while the number of women increased by 13 percent" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, 197, 208). At the same time, however, women are underrepresented in the ranks of professors, and in management positions in the private sector. Again, according to the *Digest of Education Statistics*, in the fall of 1999 there were 425,361 female faculty members and 602,469 male faculty members where faculty is defined as "those engaged in instruction and research" (U.S. Department of Education, 2002, 268). The amount of money women in the paid workforce earn, compared to men in the paid workforce, is reported each year. In the year 1999 female, full-time, year-round wage and salary workers had average earnings of $23, 551 while their male counterparts earned $40, 257 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001, 441). Although a wide variety of writing has been published addressing these issues since the modern women's movement of the 1960's and 1970's, great debate continues to exist, not only about the structure of our culture and reasons for gender disparity, but about the nature of girls and women themselves.

While academic opportunities appear to be opening up for girls and women from primary school through college, research during the last several decades has consistently demonstrated decreases in self-esteem for girls as they move out of childhood and into adolescence (AAUW, 1991; Orenstein, 1994; Sadker, 1994). In addition to self-esteem, other issues which have been examined from the perspective of gender differences include academic achievement in the middle and high school grades (Randhawa, 1991; Verna & Campbell, 1999; Wright & Houck, 1995), psychological adjustment (Street & Kromrey, 1994), risk and resiliency (Clark, 1995), differences in the way boys and girls are treated in the classroom (Hannan, 1995; Sadker & Sadker, 1994), and motivation (Leung et. al, 1996), among others.

While one must acknowledge that not all of the disparities faced by young women are within their control, and it remains important to avoid 'blaming the victim,' it is necessary to provide adolescent females with tools to navigate the world in which they live. Once we understand that world we will be better equipped to support girls. One need not look far to observe some of the obstacles to healthy development faced by adolescent girls.

- Browse through popular books and magazines that are suppose to be written for adolescent girls and notice the content-boys, make-up, dieting, clothes, sex, young media icons.
- Talk to the mother of an adolescent girl and hear tales of her loving, active, confident daughter suddenly withdrawn, insecure, and distant.
- Walk through the halls of a local high school and see girls hugging their books to their chests as they walk to class, checking their make-up in mirrors hung up in their lockers, and looking anxious as they compare their clothes to those of their peers.
- Talk to girls from a local high school and listen as they talk about the way their priorities, relationships, self-image, experiences in school, and activities have changed since elementary and middle school and

notice that these changes are not always in the direction of positive growth and development.

•Listen in on a large-group discussion in a high school classroom and hear the tentative, apologetic way girls often present their thoughts and ideas.

If counselors are to meet the needs of adolescent girls, they must understand the unique perspective and experiences of this population. Much research that claims to report on 'young women,' has, in fact, used only college women as subjects. Research that studies teen-age women, specifically, needs to be examined and understood by counseling professionals so that we can aid adolescent girls in making positive, healthy, affirming choices for themselves. Furthermore, after finding out what has been written about this population the counseling profession will be in a better position to decide what additional research needs to be undertaken. With that in mind, the author began research for this paper with the following questions at the fore:

~*What is the current base of knowledge about young women's psychological adjustment and general development?*

~*What are the experiences of adolescents, and girls in particular, with counseling? Why do they come, and how do they feel about the experience afterward?*

~*What is the current knowledge base on girls and aggressive behavior?*

~*What has been written about body-image issues in female adolescents in the last five years?*

METHOD/PROCESS

This article is the product of a review of professional counseling literature written about adolescent females. The first part of the review encompassed five journals which specifically address this life stage; *Adolescence*, *Journal of Adolescence*, *Journal of Adolescent Research*, *Journal of Research on Adolescents*, and *Journal of Youth and*

Adolescence. The table of contents of these journals, for the last five years, was read and examined by the author, who noted all articles addressing issues of gender in their title, and articles specifying the study of girls/females in their title. In addition, articles relating specifically to the following topic areas were noted:

- Body image/body decorating (piercing, tattoos) /dieting/eating habits of adolescents
- Counseling/help-seeking of adolescents and/or their experiences with counseling
- Aggression/bullying/hostility/conflict and adolescents

Other articles relating to topics of psychosocial development were noted. Articles were excluded which focus on a highly specific population, such as incarcerated teen mothers, or specifically on topics related more to physical than emotional development, for example, early puberty and nutrition.

The literature review also included the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, *The Counseling Psychologist*, and *Journal of Counseling and Development,* for the last three years noting the same types of articles mentioned above. Finally, a general search of literature was conducted of Psych Info and ERIC for 1998-2002 using the search term 'adolescent female.' A plethora of articles emerged related to sex, sexuality, predictors of early sex, sexually transmitted disease, and sexual partners; these articles were excluded unless the title indicated that the article in some way related the sexual issue to psychosocial development. A large percentage of articles found in this last search were not published in standard adolescent or counseling periodicals, but were found in journals such as *International Journal of Eating Disorders* and *Eating Disorders: The Journal of Treatment and Prevention.* Articles in the three specific categories of interest, aggression, body image, and counseling, were sorted and sub-divided.

RESULTS

A scant 11 articles related to the counseling of adolescence were found. Of these, only one related specifically to females (Gallagher & Millar, 1998), and it was a study of adolescents in Northern Ireland. Of the remaining articles, three related to expectations of, and experiences with, counseling, three articles were about help-seeking and self and other referral, and four were about the concerns of teens.

Among the 21 articles written about aggression, only five specified females/girls/gender in their titles. Ten of the aggression articles were written about the social context of bullying, and bullying in school settings. Seven articles discuss the affect on, or influence of, peers and friends in aggressive situations. The remaining four articles address problem-solving strategies, the functionality of conflict, responses to anger-provoking situations, and gender differences in disruptive behavior.

A plethora of writing exists on the topic of body image. Fifty-two articles were identified relating to dieting, body-decorating, size-perception, and a whole host of other body-image-related issues. These articles can be placed, to greater and lesser degrees, into the following categories:

> ***Cultural, social, and community factors***-These 14 articles had titles indicating a discussion of specific ethnic groups, cultural factors, or social and community factors which relate to eating patterns, body-image, and one's comfort with one's physical self.
>
> ***Self-esteem***-This group of seven articles related to psychological functioning, self-concept, and personality characteristics and their interplay with body-image issues.

Relationships-The six articles in this category examine boy-image issues in the context of relationships with parents, friends, and peers.

Media-Six articles were found which convey information about the impact of media on young women's body image concerns, or discussed media-literacy programs for young women.

Prevention-Programs which help prevent eating disorders, and the topic of help-seeking in eating disorders were the subject of five articles.

Depression-The relationship between depression and eating disorders was the subject of two articles.

Physical-Physical features such as weight, body-fat, and perceived body size were covered in five articles.

Other-The remaining seven articles, about subjects such as smoking and eating disorders, did not fit neatly into any of the above categories.

The final question remaining in the mind of the author while undertaking this literature review was, *"In addition to issues of body-image, aggression, and counseling experiences, what exactly is being written in the counseling literature about adolescent women?"* Sixty-nine articles about adolescent females, in addition to those categorized above, were found. They fall into the following categories:

13-Adjustment, Well-being, Risk-taking, Decision-making, and Self-esteem

9-Friends and Peers

9-Identity, Self, Values

8-Relationships, Parents, and Family

6-Romance, Dating, Sexual Attitudes

6-Career Development, Academic Achievement, School

5-Depression

3-Smoking

3-Feminism as it relates to adolescent women

7-did not fit into any of the above categories

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to determine what is being written about adolescent females in general, and more specifically, what is being written about their experiences with counseling, their aggressive behavior, and current issues with girls and body image. The most disquieting finding of the present study is the paucity of writing about adolescent girls and their experiences in counseling. Doubtless it is difficult to improve services to a specific population if their experiences with services, level of satisfaction, deterrents to their seeking of services, and what they believe works when they do receive services are all unknown.

The author of the present study was not surprised to find only five articles specifying a discussion of girl's aggressive behavior in their title. In the introduction to her book, *Odd Girl Out: The Hidden Culture of Aggression in Girls*, author Rachel Simmons discusses her own quest for research on this topic. She writes, "When my first few computer searchers turned up next to nothing…I called the librarian over for help…In a sea of articles on boys' aggression and bullying, there were only a small handful of articles about girls" (Simmons, 2002, 2). Girls are aggressive, writes Simmons, just not in the same way that boys are, because they are not allowed to be by their culture. Anger, frustration, and disgust are all normal human emotions experienced by girls and boys, men and women. Certainly the counseling profession would be in a better position to help adolescent females deal constructively with this range of emotions if it understood the issues better through research.

The most prominent finding of this study was the wide array of articles written about the issues of body image and dieting as they relate to adolescent women. Perhaps

the visible nature of these issues as they relate to girls' appearance makes them a more obvious focus of study. Another possible explanation is the clear damage to girls and young women of dangerous dieting practices; this topic may seem more urgent due to its visibility and potential lethality for some adolescent females. A final possibility is that a culture that still values girls and women for their appearance is more likely to focus on issues surrounding young women's bodies.

There is a great deal more work to do before we can truly understand the issues of body image, counseling experiences, and aggression from the perspective of adolescent women. See the Appendix for a sample of articles on these topics.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The almost non-existent literature base on the subject of adolescent women's experiences with counseling is a clear indicator that we need to investigate this topic more fully. Without a doubt, there are obstacles to be overcome when conducting an investigation with minors as subjects, especially when the research questions evolve around counseling and the very personal nature of therapy and the issues clients bring. This must not be a deterrent, however, if we are to serve this population. Clearly, when one reads of the issues confronting young, emerging women, not only in the counseling literature, but in the popular press, the need to understand this group becomes pressing. Questions to be investigated include: Why do adolescent women seek counseling? Once they come, what is their experience in the client/counselor relationship? When they don't come, what do they perceive as the barriers to receiving counseling services? When they cope with their problems without the help of counselors, what means do they use? How effective are those other means? What role does counseling play in helping young

women cope with body image issues? What interventions are effective and which ones are not? What role does counseling play in helping young women cope with issues of aggression in relationships? If we can understand these and other issues, we will be better able to help young women grow into strong, confident, self-assured individuals, and become strong, confident, self-assured adults.

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APPENDIX

A Sample of Articles from the three major areas of interest

Body image, body decorating, dieting and eating habit

Carroll, L., & Anderson, R. (2002) Body piercing, tattooing, self-esteem, and body investment in adolescent girls. *Adolescence,* 37, 627-637.

Polce-Lynch, M., Myers, B. J., Kliewer, W., & Kilmartin, C. (2001). Adolescent Self-Esteem and Gender: Exploring Relations to Sexual Harassment, Body Image, Media Influence, and Emotional Expression. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence 30,* 225-244.

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Counseling

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Aggressive behavior and bullying, and conflict

Black, K. A. (2000). Gender differences in adolescents behavior during conflict resolution tasks with best friends. *Adolescence, 35,* 499-512.

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